

This piece represents a small amount of work I was doing at Can Serrat. It was created as part of a chain of responses to the work of the other artists at Can Serrat in November of 2018. The chain began as an instrumental piano piece, then a riddle in Cantonese, a poem in English, a story in English (this story), and a wordless video. As we created we only allowed ourselves to see the previous link in the chain. I read this story at the Micro Obert in El Bruc on 21 November 2018.

Composure

“Repetition,” she told me. “A thousand tons a day, of water bursting into the dam. This is the type of pressure the Earth uses to make stones. So here the pressure is relieved through the valves. If we didn’t have the valves the water would pulverize the dam into sand. That’s what water wants to do, pulverize.”

She had an odd bent for a tour guide, and I meant to ask her after the tour how much had come with the script.

“Ahh,” she said. “The river is like a yawn. When it rains the river opens up and more water comes through. AhhhHHHHH—but then the rain stops and river goes back down.

AHHHhhhhhh.”

People in the crowd yawned.

“I always try to see how many people I can make yawn,” she said. And then she yawned herself and chuckled.

I hadn't known her long, my wife's sister, but this was the first time I was seeing her at work. I had the day off and my wife encouraged me to take the tour. We had only recently been married and only recently moved across the country to be near this large dam.

"The valves work harder the more water there is. Ahhhhhhh," she said again and held her mouth open, trying to see if anyone would yawn. And of course somebody did—she must've been an expert at this point—at making people yawn. The whole group laughed.

They dressed her like a flight attendant to give the tours, with a shimmery aqua scarf. At certain angles she could've been my wife. I pretended I didn't know her, and she went along. I raised my hand.

"Yes," she said.

"But what would happen if the river filled so fast the valves couldn't release the pressure? Not now, but say in a thousand years, or a million? What would the dam be then?"

"The dam? In a thousand or million years?"

She could tell I was playing with her, using the odd things she said.

"In a thousand years there will be a new dam. Or no dam at all."

"But what would happen to all this concrete? If the same dam kept standing?"

"I suppose," she said. "This dam will be worn slowly and slowly down, like one of the pyramids."

"And then sand?"

"What?"

"You said the water would pulverize the dam into sand."

"That's right. I didn't think I needed to repeat myself."

I yawned on purpose while she talked.

She didn't yawn back. "It's not that easy," she said.

At the end of the tour she gave everyone a vial filled with water from the river. The water was cloudy, like it had been shot through with milk.

"I shouldn't have to say this," she said. "But I have to say this. Don't drink the water."

I shook mine up and watched all the little particles even out. I thought maybe I'd go down river and pour my vial into the water on the other side of the dam.

"I think you can feel it," she said to me when the tour was over. "If you put your hand on the concrete. The pressure."

I put my hand against the wall. The concrete was cool, but porous and rough like a dry sponge. "Sure," I said. "I can feel it."

She looked me in the eyes and yawned.

I tried holding back, but couldn't stop the pressure building in my cheeks. When the yawn came I clamped my mouth shut. I made one of those awful faces, holding back the pressure.

"Ahh," she said. "You're one of those."